

Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-03 H-02

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2856

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

AMEMBASSY SAIGON

C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 1741

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, LA

SUBJ: IMPLICATIONS OF KING'S DECISION TO VISIT

LIBERATED ZONE AND PROCEED WITH CORONATION

REF: VIENTIANE 1426 (NOTAL)

BEGIN SUMMARY: AFTER CABINET MEETING OF FEBRUARY 26, IT WAS UNEXPECTEDLY ANNOUNCED KING WOULD VISIT PATHET LAO ZONE IN 1975 AND BE CROWNED BY THE END OF 1976, WITH PL PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG IN CHARGE OF ARRANGEMENTS. SINCE DEATH OF HIS FATHER IN 1959, KING HAS REFUSED TO BE CROWNED UNTIL LAOS WAS REUNIFIED. THERE IS A TOTAL LACK OF INFORMATION ON BACKGROUND OF THESE DECISIONS AND WE CAN ONLY SPECULATE THAT THEY ARE A PRODUCT OF NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE KING AND THE TWO PRINCES-- SOUVANNA PHOUMA AND SOUPHANOUVONG--IN PAST THREE MONTHS IN LUANG PRABANG. WE PRESUME THEY CONCLUDED TIME HAD ARRIVED TO CONTRIBUTE TO RECONCILIATION OF LAOS BY INVOLVING PERSON OF KING. FOR ALL GROUPS AND FACTIONS, HE REMAINS A SUBJECT OF AWE AND RESPECT. REGARDLESS OF HOW THEY WERE REACHED, IF DECISIONS ARE CARRIED OUT AS ANNOUNCED, REPUTATION OF SOUPHANOUVONG AS NATIONAL LEADER WILL BE CONSIDERABLY EN-
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HANCED, AND HIS CLAIM AS SOUVANNA'S SUCCESSOR WILL BE

STRENGTHENED. END SUMMARY.

1. AT BRIEFING ON FEBRUARY 26 CABINET MEETING (REFTEL), TWO UNEXPECTED AND SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS WERE ANNOUNCED CONCERNING THE KING OF LAOS: FIRST THAT KING WILL BE CROWNED BY DECEMBER 1976, WITH PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG AS CHAIRMAN OF COMMITTEE TO MAKE ARRANGEMENTS FOR CORONATION, AND SECOND THAT SOUPHANOUVONG HAD INVITED HIS MAJESTY TO VISIT THE LAO PATRIOTIC FRONT'S ZONE LATER THIS YEAR, POSSIBLY SOON AFTER LAO NEW YEAR IN MID-APRIL. IMPLICIT IN BOTH ANNOUNCEMENTS WAS THE KING'S ACCEPTANCE IN PRINCIPLE; IN A MARCH 5 BROADCAST RADIO PATHET LAO STATED THAT HIS MAJESTY WAS "GREATLY PLEASED" TO ACCEPT SOUPHANOUVONG'S INVITATION TO MAKE THE VISIT.

2. SINCE HIS ACCESSION IN 1959 KING SRI SAVANG VATTHANA HAS TAKEN THE POSITION THAT HE WOULD BE CROWNED ONLY WHEN LAOS WAS UNIFIED UNDER A SINGLE ADMINISTRATION. HIS DECISION TO PROCEED WITH CORONATION IS THEREFORE A REMARKABLE BREAK WITH HIS PAST POSITION, FOR THE COUNTRY IS CLEARLY NOT UNIFIED NOW, EXCEPT IN THEORY, AND IS UNLIKELY TO BE MORE THAN marginally SO BY LATE 1976.

3. WE KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THE NEGOTIATIONS THAT LED TO THESE DECISIONS. WE CAN ONLY SPECULATE THAT THEY RESULT FROM DISCUSSIONS IN LUANG PRABANG OVER THE LAST THREE MONTHS, PROBABLY IN THE FIRST INSTANCE BETWEEN PRIME MINISTER SOUVANNA AND PRINCE SOUPHANOUVONG AND LATER BETWEEN SOUVANNA AND THE KING. EVEN IF THE INITIATIVE CAME FROM SOUPHANOUVONG, WE HAVE LITTLE DOUBT THAT SOUVANNA LIKE THE IDEA OF INVOLVING THE PERSON OF THE KING IN WHAT ARE IMPORTANT STEPS TOWARD NATIONAL RECONCILIATION. THE KING MAY HAVE BEEN INFLUENCED BY THE REALIZATION THAT NOT MANY YEARS REMAIN TO HIM -- HE TURNED 67 LAST NOVEMBER -- AND THAT A CORONATION NOW, WITH LPF INVOLVEMENT, COULD HELP TO ENSURE THE SURVIVAL OF THE MONARCHY BEYOND HIS OWN REIGN. IN ANY EVENT, SOMETHING HAS ROUSED THE KING FROM HIS NORMAL PASSIVITY, AND HE NOW APPEARS READY TO TREAT WITH THE THE PATHET LAO AND TO CONSIDER THEM AS LOYAL SUBJECTS.

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4. FOR SOUPHANOUVONG AND THE LPF, THE VISIT AND PARTICULARLY THE CORONATION OFFER IMPORTANT BENEFITS. THE KING REMAINS A RESPECTED PERSONAGE IN THE EYES OF ALL ETHNIC LAO. IRONIC THOUGH IT MAY BE FOR A COMMUNIST, EVEN A PRINCELY ONE, TO STAGE-MANAGE A CORONATION, SOUPHANOUVONG BY BEING ASSOCIATED SO PROMINENTLY WITH THE KING IN THESE EVENTS CAN ONLY ENHANCE HIS STANDING AS A NATIONAL LEADER AND, WE EXPECT, HIS ULTIMATE ACCEPTABILITY TO MANY ON THE VIENTIANE SIDE AS A

FUTURE HEAD OF GOVERNMENT.

5. SOUPHANOUVONG'S PROSPECTIVE ROLE IN THE CORONATION SEEMS A CLEARER INDICATION THAN NUMEROUS LPF PROFESSIONS IN THE PAST THAT THE LPF IN FACT CONSIDER THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY TO BE AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF LAO NATIONHOOD. THIS DOES NOT MEAN, HOWEVER, THAT THE LPF ACQUIESCE IN THE KING'S WISHES WHEN THOSE WISHES RUN COUNTER TO LPF INTERESTS. LPF CABINET MEMBERS HAVE ON OCCASION BLOCKED IMPLEMENTATION OF ROYAL ORDINANCES SINCE PGNU WAS FORMED LAST APRIL, AND LPF IS CURRENTLY ENGAGED IN THE CAMPAIGN FOR DISSOLUTION OF THE SEVENTH NATIONAL ASSEMBLY REGARDLESS OF CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS. THE KING, ON THE OTHER HAND, CHERISHES THE CONSTITUTION ON WHICH DEPENDS THE INSTITUTION OF THE MONARCHY. (IN A RECENT INCIDENT RELISHED BY MORE COMBATIVE MEMBERS OF THE VIENTIANE SIDE, THE LPF LET DEPTH OF FEELING ON ASSEMBLY ISSUE SPILL OVER INTO THREE PAGES OF VITRIOL, INCLUDING DIRECT CRITICISM OF THE KING, IN THEIR VIENTIANE NEWS BULLETIN. WHEN THIS TACTICAL BLUNDER WAS DISCOVERED, LPF CADRE WERE DISPATCHED TO RECALL AND BUY UP COPIES OF THE BULLETIN.) WHITEHOUSE

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